

Is the UK losing its marbles post Brexit

Vicky Pryce

A lot has been written already about the reaction by the Greeks to the snubbing of their Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis by Rishi Sunak. An official visit to the UK to discuss all sorts of issues ostensibly went wrong as No10 claimed that the public raising by the Greek Pm in a BBC interview of the wish to see the Parthenon marbles, currently languishing in the British Museum returned to their rightful owners- i.e. the Greeks as they see it- contravened prior agreements the two sides had made not to do so. It was all dramatic of course. I was at an event with the Greek Foreign Minister who was part of the high-level delegation in a packed LSE lecture theatre when the news came half way through the discussions to a stunned audience. The offer to the Greeks to see the deputy PM, Oliver Dowden instead was duly refused. Suggestions abounded that Mitsotakis should instead spend the day very publicly visiting the British Museum! The high level delegation departed, having already had a cordial meeting with Sir Keir Starmer, the Labour party leader, the day before. The marbles were mentioned then, though the Labour stance that the current law prohibits a return was no different that the official Government one.

I have debated the case for the return of the Parthenon marbles – in favour- in various fora including both online and in print for Prospect Magazine. I also chose Melina Mercury, the famous actress and later Greek Culture Minister who was a passionate advocate for their return as subject for a BBC Great Lives episode I did with Matthew Paris a few years ago.

But whatever you think of the rights and wrongs, it is the message this sends about the position of the UK post Brexit that is troubling. The snubbing of an EU state, small but so important strategically given the war in Ukraine and the tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and a fellow NATO member too has been hard to explain to Greek audiences but also the world at large. And yet the recent moves – the Windsor agreement on Northern Ireland, the re-entering into the Horizon scientific programme and the indefinite recognition of the EU regulatory kitemark for a wide range of manufactured goods rather than creating its own – have all been steps in the right direction, giving some hope to business that a normalisation of relationships was at hand. And the appointment of David (now Lord) Cameron as Foreign Secretary had reinforced that.

After all, Cameron as PM had fought for a 'Yes' vote in the Brexit referendum and since his appointment has already had his first trip to Brussels and the Commission. Those hoping for a step forward as a result were encouraged. And indeed, there is a lot at stake. The UK car industry hopes for a relaxation of the rules of origin which are feared will hamper, if they remain unchanged, the exports of cars from the UK to the EU from next year, particularly electric vehicles. There has also been hope of some progress towards easier movement of professionals and for those in the creative sectors more generally.

The UK is still not imposing – and having repeatedly postponed – full controls on goods from the EU at the border, minding about adding to the cost-of-living crisis. And much more can be done to the benefit of both sides if the Partnership Council, the Partnership Committee and the various specialised committees under them set up by the current UK/EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) get down to work to achieve much needed progress before the review of the TCA due in 2025. Apart from rules of origin these cover areas such as energy, fisheries, goods more generally, air and road transport, services, investment and digital trade, intellectual property, regulatory cooperation and sustainable development.

Of course, we have elections looming and there could be a new government by the time any re-negotiation of the Brexit treaty takes place. But businesses are crying out for easing of trading costs which have already resulted in 30% of SMEs that exported to the EU ceasing to do so according to the British Chambers of Commerce. Let's hope that a way forward can be found so that the treatment of Greece does not end up setting us back even further just when it looked like things were improving.

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